

A Box, A Bike and a Bar of Chocolate

By: CalicoCat

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Chapter 1

[img:

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The inside of the box was musty, featureless, the dusty scent of old literature the only clue to its prior contents. Its semi-darkness was comforting, though, even if the walls and ceiling of her impromptu capsule were thin and did little to muffle the voices that echoed in agitation in the corridor.

“Which way did she go?!”

Sounds of chaos and confusion, and then footsteps clattering on antique tiles into the distance.

She'd mocked Ryuko - gently - but still with a sharp edge of cynicism beneath, when she'd been shown the videogame. Yet another grizzled, white male protagonist with a tragically complex back-story - she would have commented, deployed some measure of wit, but... the beard, and the eye-patch... She could see what drew Ryuko to the character; so she wouldn't pass judgement, not on this occasion anyway.

There was no doubting the efficacy of his secret technique though. She chuckled and arched her back, raising the box slightly from the floor and tiptoeing carefully down the corridor. It was amazing how the cardboard box made her invisible; her contemporaries streamed around it, like a stream diverting around a little islet, each one assuming that the responsibility for its removal lay elsewhere.

Just like the homeless in the metro and the underpasses.

She pursed her lips for a moment: she'd double or triple her donations to various shelters and charities once she got home. *If* she

ever got home. Half the university seemed to lie between her and that outcome, however. She had little practical experience, it was true - she'd admit as much herself - but Satsuki Kiryuin had some measure of certainty that this was not the way Valentine's Day was meant to be spent.

"Have you seen her?!"

"I was here first! Don't think I'll let you give her your gift before mine!"

It had started quietly enough, just a box of chocolates thrust at her by the blushing young woman in the corridor. Those had been easy enough to dodge, but then came a fusillade of flowers, candy, more chocolates - from women mostly, but also from men, foreign students unaware of convention or locals too impatient to wait for White Day.

And the brass band...

She'd known who to blame, or thank, for that. But the cacophony as she'd run between lectures on the socio-politics of the 20th century and neuroscience, was something she'd not forget in a hurry.

The interior of the cardboard box she'd found outside the library was peaceful though, a little mountain retreat as the armies swirled about in the plains beneath her.

She pushed forward, inch by inch: whenever the corridors were silent or her instincts told her to move. There'd been a few close calls though, she had to admit: she'd stopped near a lecture hall door for a moment too long as it had burst into activity on the hour, and for a moment she'd felt hands on the box, lifting it slightly:

"Shouldn't somebody move this? It's in the way."

Her breath had caught in her throat, and then laziness, indifference, some feelings she'd never had countenanced beforehand had come to her aid and:

“Just leave it. It’s not your job to clear it up.”

The box had been dropped to the floor, and the actors in that little comedy had moved off down the corridor.

She scuttled forward a few feet and felt the expanse of open space around her. In the distance she could hear wailing, an elegy that pulled at her heart-strings, even if she knew she would never reciprocate:

“I spent all week making these cakes for her!”

“This bow - I cut my hair back to the roots to make the ribbons for it! Where the hell is she!!”

She closed her eyes for a moment and sighed. She’d already learnt that you couldn’t blame another for the feelings that boiled and fermented in your own heart. They came from yourself, and only by your own self, and your own resolve, would you make them bearable.

By her reckoning she was in the atrium, the spacious cavern of marble and mahogany that was the only no-mans-land still to be crossed before freedom. Were she to make it to the broad stone steps that led down to the streets of Tokyo then she’d be free. A taxi would be sufficient for flight, or she could run, just run, and lose her pursuers in the twisting side streets of this part of the city.

She lifted the box and shuffled forward a meter or so, mindful of the angry cacophony around her; and as she did so, a sheet of paper slipped under its boundaries, revealing at least part of the articles of war that raged around her:

“Talk Dirty to Me”, arranged for marching band by Jakuzure Nonon

She didn’t know whether to laugh or cry at that: she’d thank, or chastise, (or both) her childhood friend when next she saw her.

Only a few feet left to go. She could hear the sound of mortal hand-to-hand combat: wrestling, hair-pulling, the occasional triumphal blast as someone expired into the brass or woodwind.

A few steps.

Only a few steps.

She could feel the shift in the air, the brisk freshness of the February morning and the open spaces of freedom beyond the faculty, and then:

"KIRUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUIN
SATUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUUSKI!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!"

Her phone roared in the enclosed space like the Horn of Gondor.

Silence rippled out from the box, a deafening blast-wave of anti-sound that negated the conflicts around her, as she fumbled to find the phone in her pocket, her movements compressed in the constraining space.

[illegible]

Her sister's voice was unmistakable as the ring-tone announced her presence to every nearby participant.

“Oi Oi, Sis! Just set off from the apartment!”

“Ssssssssssh!!!!!!”

“Sssssssh? What? What the hell?! You in trouble?!!!!”

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Light flooded in like rising water as the box was lifted from her. She twisted around, looking up, ignoring the muffled shouts of “Satsuki?! Hey!! What’s up???” from her phone, as she met the gaze of Tanaka-san, the aged and amiable janitor who tidied the auditoria after each lecture.

“Satsuki... sama??”

She looked around. Combatants were frozen, mid-strike, oboes and trumpets pressed into impromptu use as cudgels. Chocolates, cards and flowers were scattered over tiles and crushed underfoot, in the arena surrounding her.

The universe paused, and took a breath. And then:

“Get her!!!!!!”

She’d already started to brace herself, muscles tensing beneath plain tights and her sensible skirt. Her feet should have skittered and slid on the polished marble, just as her pursuers tumbled and tripped over one another behind her, but always mindful of the seasons, she’d glued strips of high-friction rubber to the soles of her fashionable boots, and she accelerated towards the doors of the building like a sprinter surging from the blocks.

Satsuki charged the doors, careless of whether they opened before her or simply shattered in her shockwave, and leapt the first flight of stone steps towards the road. There was shouting behind her, but off to her side she sensed someone approaching at speed. She tried to twist, to change direction, and then felt something slim and unyielding wrap around her waist and lift her into the air. For a moment she caught sight of a flash of black and red, and then she was gone.

[img:

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“You were bein’ followed by a band! Why were you bein’ followed by a band?”

Ryuko skipped the vintage bike through the Tokyo traffic, weaving onto the pavement through terrified pedestrians whenever the roads were too clogged to progress.

“On second thoughts... Scratch that. That’s kinda obvious, now I think about it.”

She dropped her shoulder and turned the bike sharply through almost ninety degrees.

“Hold on! Gonna jump.”

An arm tightened around her waist, crushing the air from her lungs.

“Nt s’ tght!!!”

Satsuki relaxed slightly, still pressing herself tight against her sister’s back, and the pedals became a blur as Ryuko powered them off the top of a short flight of steps. The frame creaked alarmingly as the bike hit the pavement, but it held, and a moment later the pair of them were ducking through quiet side-streets.

They’d had some plans for the day, but St. Valentine seemed intent on frustrating them: skewering them with his arrows whenever the opportunity arose. Cafés, bars, even park benches in the delightful blue-skied chill of a sunny February day, all were clogged with couples - leaving little space for a couple of sisters to sit and talk, to catch up a few more hours of seventeen missing years. When they’d finally found a space for themselves, a little table for two in Ginza Mitsukoshi that was conveniently far from the raging scrum of the chocolate counters, Satsuki had insisted on giving it up for the first lovelorn couple who’d passed by.

So they'd gone somewhere different, somewhere unlikely to be fertile ground for the seeds of romance that others were tending, but which ultimately had some shared history for them both. Ryuko had pedaled at a more leisurely pace along the road beside the bay until they'd come to the little observation point, the one by the expressway where people had come to watch the progress of construction during the early days of Honnou City. The telescope had long since disappeared, but the benches were still there, worn and tired, but clean and more importantly, blessedly empty.

"I should reward my knight for that daring rescue."

The self-heating can of coffee was pleasantly warm to cold fingers and the taste surprisingly good, but a thought of the expiry date made Ryuko panic for an instant. As Satsuki fished for something deep in her bag, she stole a glance at the date on the bottom: still two months hence. Someone, from the Kiryuin Conglomerate presumably, was restocking the nearby vending machine with customary efficiency. She hoped it wasn't her sister.

"There. Saved from my last business visit to Europe."

Satsuki held out a neat little rectangle - bright printed paper and silver foil - a bar of fine, if unspectacular, Swiss white chocolate. She convinced herself that it was just heat from the coffee, but Ryuko could feel color build in her cheeks for a moment as she took the bar, however it faded as quickly as it had come as she made a further realization.

"But it's just *giri-choco*, isn't it."

Satsuki said nothing, and Ryuko could feel the blush returning.

"I-I mean... It-it's not like I was hoping for anything more than that!"

Satsuki smiled, and the utilitarian concrete platform seemed a little brighter.

“Then let’s call it *ally-choco* .”

“*Arai-choco* ?”

The poor pronunciation of the English word pushed Satsuki perilously close to an uncharacteristic grin, and though it pricked her pride slightly, Ryuko made a mental note that it might be a trick worth repeating.

“*Ally* . Chocolate shared between comrades in a military endeavor.”

The wrapper had a stylized picture of the Swiss Alps. There was a young girl in national dress and an amiable-looking cow with a bell. It didn’t look particularly martial.

“So. Valentine’s Day.” Ryuko huffed in a sign of apparent exasperation.

“Indeed.”

“The day of luuuuuuuurve.” She wagged her eyebrows with suggestive exaggeration.

“Romantic love, that is. There are other sorts, of course.”

“Load of crap really.”

“Merely an excuse to sell chocolate to the romantically inclined. Quite unnecessary. And White Day too, of course.”

Ryuko appeared a little crestfallen at that last comment. On the waters of the bay, pleasure boats were plying their routes, full to the gunwales with sightseers. Ryuko fancied she could see couples on the deck, arms round each other.

“But you got quite a bit of attention. Anyone catch you?”

She really applied herself to the nonchalance of the question, but Satsuki was anyway preoccupied - staring out over the waters

towards Honnou.

“No. I managed to avoid all their offerings.”

“Good.”

Was that a cough, or a grunt, or actually a statement? Ryuko had turned to the side for a moment and Satsuki really couldn't be sure.

“And you, Ryuko. Did you receive anything?”

Ryuko relaxed again, arms stretched out and up behind her.

“Me? Hah! Tough chick like me, who'd be sending me anything?
'Cept maybe death threats!”

She ran her fingers through her hair, returning it to its usual chaotic state, undoing the effects of the wind and the bike ride, and then bowed a little with an admission.

[img:
https://media.tumblr.com/74a8e597cf4034a12d8e6a6475db007e/tumblr_inline_njs08bb1m71qb9d8d.jpg]

“Well... yeah. Mako said she bought me some chocolates. But she got hungry during the night and ate them all.”

“It's the thought that counts.” There was a little pursing of the lips that was probably some sort of smile.

“Guess it's gonna have to be.”

Darkness was beginning to race from the East, turning the daytime lightness of the sky to inky blue. On the artificial island of Honnou City, red warning lights on the skeletal fingers of construction cranes were clearly visible in the distance.

“Perhaps something should be done with Honnou Island...
Deconstruct it and put the bay back to the way it was before...”

Satsuki was almost talking to herself, in the way that Ryuko assumed somehow she must have done in the days before she had anyone to share her plans with.

“Can you really not stand to look at it anymore, Sis? Ain’t there any happy memories at all?”

Satsuki closed her eyes and breathed out long and slow, just as she did when repeating the long forms of tai chi.

“I had a heart-shaped box, full of sweet things and bright moments. I suppose Father must have filled it for me, in the years before he... before he left. I took from it, from time to time, sparingly, only when I most needed it. But though I rationed it carefully, after so many years there was nothing remaining.”

She turned to her sister and smiled, a warm smile with thoughtful eyes.

“But you’ve filled it again, Ryuko. Filled it with delights.”

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The chocolate bar was pleasingly proportioned and Ryuko turned it in her fingers for a moment before smartly drawing her nail across the middle, snapping it in half and frustrating the careful design.

Ally-choco. That was something you shared, not kept for yourself, and she held out half for Satsuki.

They sat on the observation deck, watching the island as the sun went down behind them. The chocolate was sweet, and uncomplicated, as life now was, and quite delicious.

“C’mon. I’ll run us back home. I know it’s past your bedtime.”

The temperature had dropped with the fading light, and Ryuko fished out her crimson scarf, the one that sometimes reminded her of Senketsu, and fastened it carefully around Satsuki's neck.

"So you don't catch cold. You've still gotta study."

The journey back was uneventful, Satsuki's earlier pursuers having decided to redirect their affections elsewhere, and the traffic was beginning to thin after the rush hour. She kept herself pressed to Ryuko's back, out of the wind, and listened to the ticking of the chain as the bike sped alongside cars and buses. Half way there, she felt and heard Ryuko laugh for a moment, as though she'd thought of something amusing, and when they'd chained up the bike and walked the remaining distance to the apartment her sister seemed in particularly good spirits.

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Two envelopes lay on the mat behind the front door when they returned, causing suspicious glances between the two of them, but in the end they were nothing more significant than a utilities bill and a final demand that Ryuko return a book on motorcycle maintenance to the local library.

"Turnin' in, Satsuki?"

"Yes. It's been an unexpectedly eventful day."

Ryuko wandered down the corridor towards her room, then looked back.

“Yeah, I’m whacked. Must be all that pedaling against the wind resistance of those fine eyebrows.”

She winked, but her muscles tensed instinctively, expecting some sort of projectile reply. But this time the response was delivered only in the form of a smile.

“Indeed. Perhaps I need to examine your fitness regime - it’s clearly insufficient to your responsibilities.”

Satsuki began to open the door to her own room.

“I look forward to the next Sisters’ Day.”

“Nothin’ to say we have to wait an entire year.”

Satsuki stopped for a moment and then slipped into her room.

“Nothing at all. Goodnight, Ryuko.”

In opposite rooms, on opposite beds, two gifts wrapped in very contrasting styles. One rolled in pages of the Nihon Keizai Shimbun, headlines jostling against stock market falls and a black and white photo of the young director of a multinational conglomerate: a name hastily written in biro and then highlighted in luminous yellow lest it disappear amongst the newsprint. And the other, carefully sealed in smooth red origami paper, the wrapping alone as expensive as the gifts that many received that day: a name was there too, carefully stroked with a fine brush, or an old fountain pen.

[img:

https://media.tumblr.com/2e5a9e9978eda7e7a8da2365496d60a5/tumblr_inline_njs0bcDTgP1qb9d8d.jpg]

And the former was opened with military care and a pearl-handled letter opener, and the latter with strong calloused fingers, still stained with bike oil - and both were the precious unexpected expected gifts on that first Sisters’ Day.